3.0

Organizing a Written Argument

Conversational arguments tend to have a freewheeling nature, with interruptions, abrupt changes, unsubstantiated opinions, repetitions, illogical jumps, and so forth. A written argumentative essay, by contrast, requires a formal structure, because the most essential quality of such a piece of writing is *clarity*: the reader must understand the central claim of the argument and the contribution that each part of the essay makes to that argument. If the reader gets confused about particular details, then the persuasiveness of the case the writer is attempting to make will suffer, sometimes irreparably.

3.1 | Understanding the Assignment

The first important part of preparing a written argument is to understand clearly the precise nature of the assignment. What exactly have you been asked to do? Make sure you understand that clearly. If you do not, you may produce a splendid essay, but still not succeed with the assignment.

For example, if you are asked to *describe* something or to provide a *summary*, a *précis*, or an *abstract* of a piece of writing, then no argument is required. You are simply being asked to provide a concise restatement of what someone else has said. Undergraduate courses rarely involve such assignments, except in certain forms of scientific and technical writing. A request to *discuss*, *evaluate*, *assess*, *interpret*, or *consider*, by contrast, is asking the writer to provide an argument of the sort this book explores. It is important to note the exact language the assignment uses; for example, a requirement to *compare* two works or two aspects of the same work is different from a requirement to *contrast* the two elements. Comparing two things involves exploring their similarities and differences, while contrasting two things involves focusing on their differences.

Writing a *review* of a book, film, play, or artistic exhibition is different from writing a *critical interpretation*, *evaluation*, or *assessment* of the same work. Both are arguments, but a review is usually more informal and personal. It strives to reach a wider general audience (including both those familiar with the work and those unfamiliar with it). A critical interpretation is a more formal argument about the book, film, play, or exhibition, written for those who are already familiar with it.

Some assignments require the essay writer to incorporate a certain amount of research material, and sometimes that material is specified (i.e., particular named secondary sources). Other assignments leave the essay writer free to incorporate research material or to proceed on his own, and still others require the writer to avoid research materials entirely.

Some assignments give the student a great deal of latitude in adapting the argument to what she wants to talk about; others make very particular demands. Notice, for example, how specific the wording is in the following examples:

1. Discuss three scientific objections to Darwin's theory of natural selection raised by Darwin's contemporaries. Why were these significant? Note that this assignment does not require you to consider how these objections were answered by later scientific discoveries.

2. What is the significance of Achilles' first long answer to Odysseus in Book 9 of the *Iliad*? What do we learn there about what has been happening to Achilles away from the battle? Confine your essay to a close look at this one speech.

3. In Book 10 of the *Republic*, Plato insists that in the state he is describing art will be strictly censored. Why does he make this recommendation? Can you defend what he proposes?

4. We hear a good deal nowadays about granting the terminally ill a "right to die" or a "right to an assisted suicide." Why would anyone oppose conferring such a right? Offer two or three reasons why such opposition might be worth considering.

The language in these assignments is very specific. It identifies a particular subject and directs how the writer is to shape his response to it (even, in the case of the first and the last, including a numerical stipulation).

Compare those topics just listed above with others that offer the writer wider possibilities:

1. What is the significance of the witches in *Macbeth*?

2. Write an essay evaluating an aspect of Wollstonecraft's argument in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

3. Discuss the significance in *Genealogy of Morals* of Nietzsche's remark "Only that which has no history can be defined."

4. Make a case for or against the proposal to build the Northern Gateway pipeline.

5. Why is *Citizen Kane* considered a landmark in the history of film-making?

6. Evaluate the role of Tecumseh in the War of 1812.

These topics are much more open. They specify a general subject, but provide no particular directions for or limitations on the writer (other than, in all likelihood, a recommended length for the essay), and thus there are a number of different ways one might shape an argument in response. In such cases, the writer is going to have to do a certain amount of additional preliminary work to sort out just how she might deal with the topic.

In the pages which follow here, I make a number of recommendations about how to set about organizing an essay. These recommendations may at times be assuming that the student has more freedom of choice than a particular essay topic permits. Where that happens, the student should always remember that the stipulations in the topic take precedence: her essay should always remain within any limits set by the topic and address directly any specific requirements it sets out. If you are unclear about what a particular assignment might or might not require, you should clarify the matter with your instructor as soon as possible. Generally speaking, it is unwise to trust your fellow students to resolve any doubts you have, since they may have misunderstood the relevant details. This caveat is especially important if the format of the writing assignment is something you are not familiar with.

3.2 | The Importance of Structure: Paragraphs

In order to present a clear argument, the essay needs a coherent *structure*, that is, it must guide the reader in a logical manner through the stages of the argument in such a way that she always knows where she is at every stage and has a sense of where she is going when the essay moves from one major point to the next. The logical structure of an argumentative essay is determined by the sequence of paragraphs the writer organizes and by what those paragraphs contain. Thus, before we can usefully discuss various ways to organize an argument in essay form, we need to consider a few things about paragraphs.

A paragraph is a *unified* and *coherent* sequence of sentences that belong together because they all are working to carry out the same function (they have a common purpose). The *unity* of a paragraph comes from its concentration on that single function, and the *coherence* of the paragraph comes from the way the sequence of sentences in it carry out that function in a logical manner.

Now, for reasons that will be apparent later on, in order to carry out their function properly most paragraphs in written arguments should be substantial. In other words, they should be long and detailed enough to do the job. What that means, in practice, is that they should, in most cases, be somewhere between 150 and 250 words each (at least).

An assignment to write an essay usually comes with a recommended length expressed as a number of words or of double-spaced printed pages (the latter unit of measurement is equivalent to about 250 words per page). However, in order to organize the essay properly, the writer needs to know, not the total number of words, but rather how many paragraphs she has to work with. Consequently, where a word or page limit is specified, you should immediately translate this recommended page or word limit into a paragraph number (by dividing the total number of words by 200). That will give you an approximate sense of how many building blocks (i.e., paragraphs) the essay will have.

An essay of, say, 1000 words (four double-spaced pages) will thus become an essay of about 5 paragraphs; a research paper of 3000 words, an essay of approximately 15 paragraphs, and so on.

You need to do this because the number of paragraphs at your disposal will play a major role in determining the structure of the essay. An assignment to write, say, a 750-word essay on hydraulic fracking will have a very different structure from an assignment to write a 2500-word essay on the same topic.

Organizing the structure of the essay begins once you have determined what you wish to argue about and have estimated the number of paragraphs you have at your disposal. These paragraphs will have to offer (in a logical sequence) at least three things:

AN INTRODUCTION (defining what the argument is about)

A MAIN BODY (a sequence of paragraphs making the argument)

A CONCLUSION (a final summary of the argument).

The Introduction and Conclusion (normally the first and last paragraphs of the essay) will each take at least one paragraph. Hence, the Main Body of the argument will have available a minimum of two fewer paragraphs than the total number established by the guidelines to the assignment. Thus, in an assignment calling for a 1000-word essay, you have approximately 3 or 4 paragraphs with which to make the argument.

3.3 | A Note on the Tone of the Argument

Before we move on to consider ways to start organizing the essay in detail and to launch the process of writing an introduction, we should briefly consider the important question of the *tone* of the essay. This issue is obviously not a matter of structure, but it is appropriate here to spend a few moments considering it, because

the tone of your writing can have a decisive effect on the persuasiveness of the argument.

An academic essay is an exercise in writing a formal prose argument. Consequently, it is not a place to be too freely colloquial. On the other hand, in contrast to the stultifying nature of a great deal of academic prose, an undergraduate essay should be relatively easy to follow for an educated general reader. So, to put the matter simply, the writer should chart a path somewhere between slang and jargon, between the street and the scholarly conference. She should write the essay as if she were writing a letter to an intelligent aunt or uncle who is keenly interested in what she has to say but is in no mood to put up with bar-room or internet lingo, chat-room abbreviations, and profanity or to endure tedious attempts to overinflate the importance of the argument with whatever specialized technical language is currently fashionable in the discipline. In other words, that relative would like to read some natural, friendly, correct, polite, and energetic prose.

Here are a few principles to guide you (the list is not meant to be exhaustive).

1. Write naturally, bearing in mind that your readers may not appreciate slang or insults or swearing. Do not try to twist your natural style into something different because you think that will make your argument more impressive, friendly, amusing, or persuasive. Avoid being flippant or too casually dismissive. Keep the language clear and straightforward. Do not use unnecessarily technical terminology or too many passive verbs (if you don't know what a passive verb is, then find out, and learn to keep that form of the verb to a minimum).

2. Put some energy and conviction—some passion—into your prose, especially when you are expressing an opinion. In the first draft of an essay, it is sometimes a good idea to overstate your opinion in order to add some energy to the argument.

If you overdo it, you can always scale back later, when you review the initial draft. Avoid words which make you sound too cautious, too much like a timid wimp (e.g., *interesting*, *positive*, *negative*, and so on). Notice the difference between the sentences in each of the following pairs:

a. The ending leaves one with a negative feeling about the film.

   The ending of the film is an incomprehensible mess—a hodgepodge of violence, special effects, and unconvincing, badly written verbal exchanges offered up as meaningful dialogue.

b. The character of the heroine is interesting. She has many positive qualities but by the end is not very likeable.

   The character of the heroine is mysteriously fascinating throughout. She is obviously a brilliant, courageous woman, but by the end has become strangely repellent.

c. The government's failure to act in this matter has been problematic and not very positive.

   The government's failure to act in this matter has been a public disgrace and has turned a manageable problem into an urgent and unnecessary crisis.

3. Do not, however, let your commitment to an energetic style take you overboard, especially when you are denouncing someone else. You can certainly be firm, even energetically dismissive ("But that view is ridiculous," "The company's study is fatally flawed, slipshod, and not worth taking seriously," "The hero at this point seems to be acting like a complete fool"). But do not be excessively insulting ("People who

believe that are cretinous idiots," "Corporations are fascist pigs," "Our state legislature is made up of nothing but spendthrift, bleeding-heart liberals and illiterate, Bible-thumping rednecks," and so on). Such a style calls into question your own commitment to reasonable argument and, in an extreme case (like a reference to someone as a *Nazi* or *feminazi*), can demolish your argument on the spot. Harsh words, like *Nazi*, *fascist*, *tyrannical*, and so on, are appropriate only when they accurately describe a person or situation (i.e., when the literal meaning applies, as in, for example, "During the war, he expressed racist views in keeping with the ideology of the Nazis"), not when they are simply employed as cheap, over-the-top insults.

4. As a general rule, don't overuse the pronouns "I" and "me." Occasional use of these personal pronouns is quite acceptable, but try to avoid unnecessarily repetitive use of the expressions *I think* or *in my opinion*, *in my view*, *to me*, and so on. Some students seem to believe that sprinkling these phrases like salt all through the essay will deflect criticism, because, after all, the writer is entitled to a personal opinion, which the reader must respect. However, these phrases are not really necessary, because the reader understands that the entire essay is an argument in defence of a personal viewpoint. Regardless, an opinion is only as good as the argument supporting it; just because an argumentative position is one person's opinion doesn't mean that it is a reasonable opinion worth listening to. Moreover, the habit of constantly reminding the reader of yourself can also make the tone of the argument very defensive, as if you are trying to protect yourself from criticism and do not have the confidence to state your positions firmly.

5. Do not let statements of how you feel about an issue carry too much of the argument. The essay is a rational argument

designed to persuade the reader that the view of the writer about a specific subject is worth attending to. The heart of that argument is a series of reasons based upon the analysis of evidence or of shared principles or of both. As such, an academic essay should not confine itself to or base itself primarily upon an expression of the writer's personal feelings or beliefs, however passionate and eloquent these may be. Obviously, a strong emotional response to a particular experience or issue may well stimulate a student's interest in writing about what he finds so stimulating, and if the writer has deeply held convictions about a subject, such feelings can play an important part in the persuasiveness of his or her case. But the core of the essay should be an argument based on impersonal reasoning.

You can think about an assignment to write an argumentative essay as an invitation to join in a public discussion about a disputatious issue. The task at hand is not necessarily to tell others how you feel about the issue, but rather to offer a worthwhile contribution to the ongoing debate by appealing to their reason, to their respect for principles, evidence, and clear logic. Passionate personal pleas or denunciations obviously are an important part of human responses to particular events, but they are usually out of place in reasonable arguments. In many cases, they tend to reveal far more about the person making the appeal than they do about the issues involved.

4.0

Setting Up the Argument

In considering the importance of defining an argument at the start of an essay, this section and the next discuss two different but related concepts: first, establishing clearly what the argument is about (the concern of this section) and, second, explaining any key terms and providing background information essential to a clear understanding of the argument (the concern of the next section). The main point here is that an argument cannot usefully proceed until we all know exactly what the issue is, share a common understanding of any potentially ambiguous terms, and possess information essential to grasping what is to follow.

In some arguments, the second requirement (explaining key terms and providing information) may not be necessary because

the central terms are all clear enough and readers already have all the information they need (although, as we shall see, that is not something one should assume too readily). In all argumentative essays, however, the first requirement is absolutely essential.

4.1 | Defining the Argument

The first requirement of any written argument is that it must establish clearly what the precise issue is. That is, the opening phase of the argument has to identify the *subject* matter of the argument and the *particular view of that subject* which the arguer is seeking to persuade the reader to accept. In almost all cases, you will need to do this before you start the main body of the argument (i.e., at the very beginning, in a section commonly called the *Introduction*).

The introduction to an argument is so crucial that if it is done poorly then there is virtually no recovery. No matter how you deal with the rest of your case, if the reader is unclear about what you are trying to do, then the relevance of that case becomes muddled. This fault is particularly common in undergraduate essays and research papers, because students frequently rush the opening of the essay in their haste to get the argument launched.

There are a number of different ways to establish an argument effectively, and we will be going through some examples shortly. However the writer sets out the introduction, it must achieve three things, as follows:

1. The introduction must alert the reader to the general subject area being considered (e.g., a film, a political issue, a social concern, a historical event, a work of literature, a scientific concept, and so on), in answer to the question: "In general terms, what area of experience is this essay dealing with?"

2. The introduction must narrow down that general subject so as to define a very specific *focus* for the argument, in answer

to the reader's question: "Just what very particular part of this general subject area is this argument concentrating on?"

3. The introduction must set out an argumentative opinion about the focus mentioned above in Step 2. This argumentative opinion, which is the central claim you are making in the argument and which you want the reader to accept, is called the *thesis* of the argument.

As we shall see later, some arguments will require more introductory material than this, but all essay and research paper arguments require these three parts in the introduction.

4.1.1 | Two Simple Examples

In a relatively short essay, you can usually deal with the three requirements of an Introduction in a single substantial paragraph (almost invariably the opening paragraph). Here are two typical examples.

Introduction A

Few issues in medical ethics are more complicated than what has come to be called the "right to die" or the "right to an assisted suicide." For thirty years (at least) we have been debating the issue, and we appear to be no closer to a resolution than we were at the start. This situation is perhaps not surprising, given that the subject raises all sorts of legal, ethical, religious, and moral questions, none of which is capable of a quick resolution satisfactory to all. Of all these questions, one of the most troubling is the notion of "informed consent," the idea that a terminally ill patient with her mental faculties intact should be allowed, under specified conditions, to set in motion a process that will end her own life. It is easy enough to appreciate the argument that people should be given the freedom to control their

own destinies as they see fit, but at the same time one has to wonder whether the power to make a decision to terminate one's life can in most cases be entirely free and autonomous. In fact, given the practical realities of many (perhaps most) terminally ill patients and their families, the very idea of informed consent, an essential element in any argument advocating a right to die, is open to serious doubts. For that reason alone, we should insist that helping a terminally ill patient commit suicide remain an illegal act.

Introduction B

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is, by common consent, an ambiguous play, with many conflicting interpretative possibilities. At the heart of many disputes about the play is the character of the hero himself. Just what sort of person is Prince Hamlet? The play puts a lot of pressure on us to explore this question, simply because the motivation for Hamlet's actions and inaction is by no means clear, and yet it is obviously important. A comprehensive answer to this issue is beyond the scope of a short essay. Nevertheless, whatever Hamlet's character adds up to exactly, one very curious feature of it is his attitude toward and relationships with women. For there is a clear pattern in Hamlet's language and behaviour whenever he is thinking about or talking to Ophelia and Gertrude. This pattern is so distinctively aggressive and (at times) cynical, bitter, and insulting that we can reasonably assume it indicates something important about the prince. In fact, Hamlet's attitude to these two women and, beyond them, to women in general, is an important indication of the general psychological unhealthiness of Hamlet's character.

Notice carefully how these introductions proceed. The writers open by announcing a general subject (assisted suicides, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*). In the next few sentences the

introductions narrow the focus, that is, restrict the subject matter to something very specific (the notion of "informed consent" and then the problem with that idea; the question of Hamlet's character and then the question about his relationship to women). And the introductions end by establishing a firm opinion about this focus (we should keep assisted suicide illegal; Hamlet's attitude to women is an important symptom of his emotional ill health). By the end of each introduction the reader is fully aware of what the writer is trying to argue (both the particular subject matter and the opinion about that subject matter).

4.1.2 | General Features of an Introductory Paragraph

This structure illustrated above is really useful if you are uncertain how to set up the opening to an essay or research paper. Notice the pattern:

4. The opening sentence announces the general subject (a public health issue, a particular work of literature, a political or historical event, a social problem, a technological development, and so on). The general subject matter will usually be contained in the topic for the essay that the instructor has set. The function of this sentence is to get the reader, who at this point has no idea what the essay is going to be about, to direct his attention to a particular area.

   If the essay is on a particular work of literature, then the opening sentence should normally identify it by indicating the author and the title. Do not confuse the reader by failing to identify the specific work you are dealing with (for example, by using a phrase like *this book* or *this work* instead of the specific title).

5. The next two or three sentences narrow the subject matter down to one particular aspect, so that the reader understands clearly that you are not dealing with any and all

questions arising from that subject but only with one particular question or area of concern.

6. Finally at the end of the introduction, the last one or two sentences announce the opinion about that focus—the thesis of the essay—so that the reader understands what you are arguing in the essay.

You need to do this even if the essay is a response to a very specific topic that establishes, not merely the general subject area, but also a very narrow focus. Notice the following sample introduction to an essay topic that already stipulates a precise focus.

> TOPIC: Discuss three scientific objections to Darwin's theory of natural selection raised by Darwin's contemporaries. Why were these significant? Note that this assignment does not require you to consider how these objections were answered by later scientific discoveries.
>
> INTRODUCTORY PARAGRAPH: Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*, as is well known, got a very hostile reception from some leading members of the religious establishment in England and from elements of the press. Less well known perhaps is the fact that the book also offended many well-known and respected scientists, including a number of Darwin's colleagues. No doubt, the attitude of many of these scientific critics was prompted by their religious convictions. But that is by no means the entire story, for there were also a number of scientific objections to Darwin's account of the evolutionary process, and some of these criticisms were by no means trivial. Indeed, given the fact that at least three of these scientific objections struck at the very heart of Darwin's theory and that neither Darwin nor anyone else could provide satisfactory answers to them, one might well wonder why anyone continued to take the theory seriously.

Notice how this introduction still follows the general pattern: introducing the general subject (*Origin of Species*), narrowing that down to a specific focus (objections and then scientific objections and then three scientific objections), and establishing an argumentative opinion (that these objections were sufficiently important to cripple Darwin's theory). Even though the language in the assigned topic defines the subject matter and the focus precisely, the writer has still provided a full introduction. Someone who has read this introduction does not need to know anything about the assigned topic in order to understand what the essay will be arguing.

What you should *not* do in writing an essay on the above topic is plunge right way into the argument requested, for example, by starting the essay as follows: "Well, one important scientific objection to Darwin came from...." Take the time to produce a coherent introduction.

To recap, by the end of the introduction the reader must have clear answers to some very specific questions, as follows:

1. What is the general subject matter of this essay?

2. What particular part of this general subject is the writer focusing on? Is there any particular aspect of that subject which the writer is clearly *not* discussing?

3. What opinion about that focus is the subject matter of the argument? What does the writer want me to believe?

If the reader cannot answer these three questions clearly by the end of the introduction, if there is any confusion about them, then there is something wrong with the paragraph. If you find yourself concerned about whether or not you have set up a good introduction to your own essay, get someone to read the paragraph and then answer the three questions above. If she cannot answer them correctly or is confused, you need to rewrite the opening definition of the argument.

Notice also what the sample introductions in 4.1.1 and 4.1.2 above are *not* doing. They are not offering us huge generalizations about Shakespeare or Darwin, or about society or the world or the meaning of life. They begin by defining a subject and then continue by narrowing down that subject to a particular focus.

4.2 | The Importance of Identifying a Focus

In setting up your own written arguments, you need to pay particular attention to defining very clearly the particular part of the general subject matter you will be concentrating on, the *focus*. Remember that you are the one in charge of the argument; you can shape it in any way you like, indicating what you are looking at and what you are not looking at. Doing this properly will make constructing the argument very much easier. If you fail to sharpen the focus, then the reader may legitimately ask why you have not looked at some things included in the general subject.

The assigned essay topic may already define a focus for the argument, in which case you do not need to think of how you might restrict that part of the essay any further. If the language of the essay topic clearly stipulates what you are and are not to examine, then you should not seek to change that focus. However, to repeat myself, you should in your introductory paragraph still indicate what the focus of the essay is. Do not rely on the language of the assigned essay topic to convey that information to the reader.

Suppose, however, that the essay topic permits you some latitude in what you choose to look at in your argument and that, for example, you need to write an essay on a long work of fiction (play, novel, epic poem, film, or television series). There are a number of things you could discuss and perhaps want to discuss, but for the purposes of the essay you have to choose. You might begin by jotting down various possibilities, thinking about and discussing them with friends, but at some point you need to make a decision. The focus of the essay will be some aspect of the fiction: perhaps a single character, a particular relationship, a recurring theme,

one feature of the setting, the role of the narrator, the cinematic style, or something else. Normally what you choose should be a particular part of the work you find intriguing and significant, an element that really helps to shape your response to the fiction and that you think anyone wishing to understand the work better could benefit from considering closely.

Similarly, if you are organizing an essay about a complex social or political issue, then isolate a very particular aspect of that issue, rather than trying to tackle an unmanageably large subject. If the essay is interpreting a long argumentative work (e.g., in philosophy or political theory), select a very particular part of the argument—if possible, one you find interesting, challenging, problematic, or even, in some cases, distasteful—and focus the essay exclusively on that. What you choose to look at should be something that will enable you to present an argument giving the reader of your essay some insight into that focus and, beyond that, into the general subject as well.

By going through this process, you have taken a complicated subject and selected from it a very specific part that will be much easier to deal with. In fact, as a general rule, the more narrowly and clearly defined the focus is, the easier the essay will be to write and the more persuasive the argument will be. Notice, too, that in defining the focus clearly, you are also indicating to the reader and, most importantly, to yourself the *scope* of your argument, that is, what it will and will not include.

Students are frequently reluctant to narrow the focus because they are worried about not having enough to say. Thus, they set themselves from the start a very difficult task by choosing an argument on a very wide topic. This mistake you should avoid at all costs. It is much better to argue in detail about a more narrowly defined topic than to offer a superficial look at something much wider. Make sure you understand this point.

By way of reinforcing this suggestion, let me return to some remarks I made in the introduction to this book. The purpose of the essay is to communicate your perceptions about something

significant to the general subject. The essay will be successful if it helps the reader go back to that general subject with more insight, so that he recognizes and appreciates something that he had not noticed before or that he had noticed but not thought much about. Providing that insight about a relatively small part of the matter at hand can make your argument a very helpful contribution to his understanding of much wider issues. In fact, your detailed exploration of a single element will almost certainly be more useful to him than any attempt to offer a more comprehensive but shallower argument about a complex subject, particularly in a relatively short essay.

Here are some examples (in point form) that illustrate the transformation of a very large general subject, through a series of steps, into a sharp and particular focus.

Essay 1
GENERAL SUBJECT: The television series *Breaking Bad*
FOCUS 1: *Breaking Bad*: the importance of the setting
FOCUS 2: *Breaking Bad*: the importance of the setting: the desert

Essay 2
GENERAL SUBJECT: Lyme disease
FOCUS 1: Treatment of long-term Lyme disease
FOCUS 2: Treatment of long-term Lyme disease: problems
FOCUS 3: Treatment of long-term Lyme disease: problems with the medical establishment

Essay 3
GENERAL SUBJECT: Illegal immigration
FOCUS 1: Illegal immigration: the economic impact
FOCUS 2: Illegal immigration: the economic impact on the hospitality industry
FOCUS 3: Illegal immigration: the economic impact on the hospitality industry in California

Essay 4
GENERAL SUBJECT: John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*
FOCUS 1: The importance of free competition
FOCUS 2: The importance of free competition in education

Essay 5
GENERAL SUBJECT: The French Revolution
FOCUS 1: The causes of the French Revolution
FOCUS 2: The immediate causes of the French Revolution
FOCUS 3: The immediate causes of the French Revolution: the economic problem

Essay 6
GENERAL SUBJECT: Ibsen's play *A Doll's House*
FOCUS 1: The sense of a corrupt middle-class society
FOCUS 2: The sense of a corrupt middle-class society: the significance of Dr. Rank

Essay 7
GENERAL SUBJECT: Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*
FOCUS 1: Conrad's descriptive language
FOCUS 2: Conrad's descriptive language: the jungle
FOCUS 3: Conrad's descriptive language: the jungle in Marlow's trip upriver

Essay 8
GENERAL SUBJECT: Religion in schools
FOCUS 1: School prayer
FOCUS 2: School prayer: the *Engel v. Vitale* case in New Hyde Park, New York

Notice what is happening in these lists. The opening subject, a very large and complicated topic, is being transformed into a very specific and much narrower sub-topic, which the essay is going to look at closely. You should always end up with a focus that is

much more restricted than the general subject and that is manageable in the space available.

An examination of the examples above indicates some of the ways in which you can narrow down the general subject. In dealing with a work of literature, for example, you can limit the focus by looking at a particular character or a particular scene or a particular pattern in the descriptive language in one or two selections or in a particular section of the text. If the general subject is a social issue, you can restrict the focus geographically (by looking only at California) or demographically (by considering only the medical establishment), or by considering a single instance (the legal case in New Hyde Park). In an essay on a historical event where you are to argue about causes or effects, you can select one particular cause or effect and focus exclusively on that, rather than trying to account for a great many more.

At first, of course, you may not be certain just what you wish your argument to focus upon. You may well need to do some research and talk the matter over with others. But the time spent on this process is very worthwhile—it will clarify what you are trying to do (and not trying to do) and remind you that your essay is not about everything you might want to discuss. But the sooner you select the focus, the easier it will be to carry out detailed research into the subject matter.

Once you have determined and defined the focus of the essay, of course, you will not be able to introduce into your argument anything outside that focus, and thus you may have to remove from your list of possibilities some things you would dearly love to write about. In the interests of organizing the essay, however, you have to be ruthless: get rid of whatever is irrelevant.

4.3 | The Importance of Establishing a Thesis

After you have determined a specific focus for the argument, then you need to develop an opinion about that focus. In other

words, you need to present an argumentative statement about the narrowly defined subject matter you have selected. This point is critical. You cannot base an argument merely on the focus you have defined. You must present an *opinion* about that focus, something we can argue about. This opinion is called the *thesis*, the single most important sentence or series of sentences in the entire argument.

You cannot, for example, base an argumentative essay on the attitude of the medical establishment to chronic Lyme patients—or on Dr. Rank in *A Doll's House* or on the legal case in New Hyde Park or on Conrad's descriptive language in Marlow's trip upriver or on the economic causes of the French Revolution or on what Mill says about education. You must base the essay on an *opinion* (an argumentative position) about one of those. And, in general, the sharper the opinion and the more energetically you express it, the clearer the thesis will be, both to you and to the reader.

The thesis should answer the question: What precisely is the presenter of this argument trying to persuade me to believe? If that is not clear, then the argument's central purpose is fuzzy or missing. So you need to take particular care to conclude the introduction with an unambiguous definition of your thesis, which must be an assertion that someone can dispute (i.e., argue about).

When you set out to do this, remember what we discussed previously (in section 2.2 above), namely, that certain statements do not make a good thesis, because they do not offer anything we can argue about or disagree with. Make sure your thesis does not fall into this category. Notice, for example, that the following statements would make very poor thesis statements, because, although they have a very particular focus, they are not sufficiently argumentative; they state matters which we can quickly confirm by an appeal to the text or to an existing authority:

1. Dr. Rank is suffering from an incurable fatal disease he inherited from his father.

2. Long-term sufferers of Lyme disease often complain about the treatment they receive from doctors.

3. In his discussion of the importance of maximizing freedom in society Mill turns his attention to education.

4. The French revolution had numerous causes, long-term and short-term, and the economy was one of them.

5. Illegal immigration is a widespread problem.

These sentences are useless as thesis statements, because they present nothing we can usefully argue about. They are matters of fact. If that's all you offer at the end of your introduction, then the reader is going to be very puzzled why you are striving so hard to argue about something obvious. Notice the difference between the above statements and the following.

1. Dr. Rank's presence in the play is a repeated reminder of the deadly corruption, both moral and physical, infecting the apparently comfortable middle-class society in which the action takes place.

2. The attitude of the medical establishment (doctors and hospitals) towards long-term sufferers of chronic Lyme disease is often disgracefully callous and dismissive. This situation needs to change.

3. Mill's remarks on education are especially challenging: they take issue with some of our most cherished notions of the role of government in a liberal society and are all the more valuable because of that.

4. Of all the causes of the French revolution, the most significant was the disastrous state of the French economy.

5. Illegal immigration is the economic mainstay of the hospitality industry in California. Any serious attempts to limit the employment of illegal immigrants would be financially crippling to the industry.

These statements put something argumentative on the table. We can easily disagree (or be reluctant to be persuaded), and the writer is going to have to work to convince us. Such statements do not simply announce a matter of fact about which no dispute is possible.

If you do not set the essay up with a clearly argumentative thesis, then the logic of the argument will be defective, because the reader will not be clear about what you are trying to establish. Please make sure you understand this key point. The failure to establish a good thesis is the single most important logical error in student essays.

One final point about thesis statements. I mentioned above (in section 3.3) that in an argumentative essay the writer needs to be careful about letting personal feelings carry too much of an argument in which the challenge is to present a rational case advocating a particular opinion. This point is especially important in formulations of the thesis, where statements of one's personal feelings or beliefs, no matter how sincere and interesting, are generally inappropriate, as in the following examples:

1. As a devout Christian I find the modern biological account of evolution unacceptable.

2. *The Matrix* was just too confusing and ambiguous for me. I found that really frustrating.

3. To a socialist like myself, what Mill has to say about education smells too much like liberal propaganda.

4. Rousseau's recommendations in *Emile* about educating women really offend me.

To opinionated assertions like this, a reader might well be tempted to respond, "All right, but so what? What does your personal opinion have to communicate that will help me understand debates about the modern biological account of evolution or *The Matrix* or Mill's argument or Rousseau's views on educating women?" Notice the difference between these statements of personal opinion and more useful argumentative assertions about the same subject:

1. Some modern religious objections to the scientific account of evolution are more substantial than many people recognize. If we all understood the full implications of that theory many of us might well share some of the same objections.

2. *The Matrix* is, in places, very ambiguous and confusing. These characteristics contribute to the film's portrayal of life in a digital age as an experience of constant change in which the lines between the real and the imagined are blurred.

3. Mill's argument about education is an eloquent statement of liberal principles at work, but from a socialist perspective his recommendations look suspiciously like a blueprint for the enshrinement of social inequality.

4. Rousseau's recommendations about educating women arise logically out of his conception of gender roles. However, his argument in defence of these recommendations leads him inescapably into logical difficulties that undermine the entire educational program he is proposing and encourage one to raise serious questions about his original assumptions regarding gender.

The above statements are not merely expressing a personal opinion. They are setting up an argument, and the writer is going to have to persuade us with a detailed look at particular evidence.

4.3.1 | *Forming Good Thesis Statements*

Given the crucial importance of setting up a good thesis that will define the central claim of the essay, you should not rush this part of the argument. Here are some points to consider in selecting and refining the thesis:

1. The thesis must present your opinionated engagement with the focus you have defined. So it's a good idea to base it on an examination of why you find what you have selected as the focus particularly important. As I mentioned above, that interest might well be initially aroused by a particular response (e.g., to a character you find fascinating, an argument you don't agree with, a writing style you think is wonderfully evocative, a conclusion you find problematic, and so on), but remember that the thesis should focus, not on how you feel about that particular element, but rather on why it is significant for an understanding of the subject under discussion. For example, an essay on, say, the descriptive power of Conrad's writing about the jungle in *Heart of Darkness* should be based on an opinion about why looking closely at his style in these passages provides a significant analytical insight into something important to the story, not just on why you find particular passages marvellous pieces of writing.

2. A claim that arguments about a particular subject are difficult to sort out expresses an opinion and often makes a good thesis: e.g., "The debate about giving people a legal right to an assisted suicide is impossible to resolve because there are such cogent arguments on both sides," "Given the arguments and counterarguments about fracking, the issue remains incapable of clear resolution." Such statements are opinions, which you will have to argue; as such, they are useful thesis statements. Here again, however, remember that the essay is not primarily an argument about your own confusion;

you are arguing that, if we look at the evidence, there is no immediately obvious resolution to the public debate. Your essay will then supply an argumentative analysis of the reasons why that opinion is worth attending to.

3. Similarly, a thesis statement can be a mixed opinion, in which you call attention to conflicting judgements of a particular subject: e.g., "The film has excellent acting and some superb cinematography. Unfortunately, the script in places is very poor. Hence, the experience of viewing it is not as enthralling as it might be." Such mixed opinions are quite common as thesis statements in essays reviewing fine and performing arts events.

4. Do not rush the thesis. If necessary take two or three sentences to get the clearest possible statement of the precise opinion you are presenting and defending in the argument. Do not proceed with the argument until you have defined your thesis as precisely as possible. The clearer and more explicit you are at this point, the easier the rest of the writing process will be. In your thesis statement, don't say "Hamlet's dilemma is interesting" when you can say "Hamlet's dilemma reflects a dilemma at the centre of human experience: whether to accept injustice or act decisively in the face of it." Don't say "This poem's portrayal of x is complex" when you can say "This poem presents two competing visions of x, each of which ultimately undermines the other."

   This issue of making the thesis explicit is particularly important because a clear and specific thesis adds clarity and energy to the opening of the argument. So, for example, you should try to avoid a thesis which ends with a rather vague adjective (like "interesting" or "complex" in the above examples). Here are some more examples of this habit:

Conrad's descriptive prose in the passages describing Marlow's trip upriver is remarkable.

The effects of any concerted attempt to restrict illegal immigration would be harmful.

The question of whether terminally ill people should have the legal right to an assisted suicide is problematic.

These thesis statements express opinions, but they are imprecise and limp. To make them more energetic, specific, and interesting, you can add a "because" clause after them.

Conrad's descriptive prose in the passages describing Marlow's trip upriver is remarkable because it brings out so well Marlow's sense of the fascinating mystery and the almost overwhelming fecundity of the jungle while at the same time conveying his growing sense of the potentially lethal physical and psychological danger it poses.

The effects of any concerted attempt to restrict illegal immigration would be harmful because they would severely limit the availability of farm labour (thus leaving farmers incapable of harvesting their crops) and significantly raise food prices for the consumer.

The question of whether terminally ill people should have the legal right to an assisted suicide is problematic because the legal and moral issues involved admit of no easy resolution.

Alternatively, of course, you could leave out "because" and simply make the reasons part of the main clause in the thesis:

Conrad's descriptive prose in the passages describing Marlow's trip upriver brings out remarkably well Marlow's sense of the fascinating mystery and the almost overwhelming fecundity of the jungle while at the same time conveying his growing sense of the potentially lethal physical and psychological danger it poses.

The effects of any concerted attempt to restrict illegal immigration would severely damage our economy: they would limit the availability of farm labour, thus leaving many farmers incapable of harvesting their crops, and would significantly raise food prices for the consumer.

The question of whether terminally ill people should have the legal right to an assisted suicide raises legal and moral issues that admit of no easy resolution.

5. Try not to be too timid in presenting the thesis. Often it's a good idea to overstate the opinion (i.e., really go out on a limb), so that you know you have a real job to do in making the case. At any event, make the thesis as bold and assertive as you dare. If it looks too aggressive once you have written the essay, then you can moderate it. In fact, it is always a good idea, once you have finished the first draft of an essay, to revisit the thesis statement and make sure that it matches the argument you have actually made; then you can moderate, expand, or alter your statement as necessary.

   If you wish to express your thesis as forcefully as possible, remember that there is an important difference between an energetic thesis and an exaggerated one. Do not let your desire to offer a strongly assertive thesis lead you to make a claim that is excessive, especially one based on a sweeping generalization that the reader may feel you are not qualified to make. There is an important difference, for example, between the following claims:

> The book is an enthralling exploration of modern combat, a fascinating and compelling vision of the glory and horror of war.
>
> The extraordinary quality of this novel makes it quite simply the best story of combat ever written.

Both of these statements are strong, energetic opinions, but the second invites the reader to wonder whether you are not simply exaggerating for effect. The claim might well prompt the obvious question: Have you read every story of combat ever written?

4.3.2 | Exercise: Recognizing Potentially Useful Thesis Statements

Comment on each of the following statements as a useful thesis, that is, as something that might form a clearly opinionated basis for an effective argument. Note that this exercise is not asking whether you agree with the statement or not but whether you think it clearly defines an argumentative position.

1. Beth Henley's wonderful play *Crimes of the Heart* was turned into a commercially successful film.
2. *The Duchess of Malfi* is a vastly overrated play, contradictory in its presentation of characters, ambiguous in its literal details, and excessively melodramatic in many crucial scenes.
3. Modern North Americans spend a great deal of money on supplies, veterinary medicine, and food for their pets.
4. Modern North Americans spend far too much money on supplies, veterinary medicine, and food for their pets.
5. McIntyre and Robinson, two medical researchers at McGill University, conducted five separate studies of

fetal alcohol syndrome. They concluded that it is a serious problem in modern society.

6. The study by McIntyre and Robinson, two medical researchers at McGill University, which concluded that fetal alcohol syndrome is a serious problem, is a badly flawed study that produced very misleading conclusions.
7. Frost's poem "Mending Wall" is constructed around a central image of two men repairing a wall between their two properties.
8. In Frost's poem "Mending Wall" the central image of the two men repairing a wall brings out the paradoxical feelings of the speaker regarding figurative boundaries in human relationships. In doing so, the poem captures the ways in which fear of otherness interferes with the development of mutual understanding on both personal and political levels.
9. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft devotes considerable time to discussing the education of women.
10. I quite enjoyed the film *Titanic*.
11. *Titanic* is such a sentimental and poorly scripted and acted work that one wonders what on earth our public standards had come to in 1997, such that the film won so many awards and so many people all over the world flocked to see it several times. Whatever the sociological explanation, the film is undeserving of the accolades it received.
12. We should be paying more attention to dealing with spousal abuse in our society.
13. Violence against women is a common problem in modern society.
14. Violence against women is, quite simply, the most serious crime in our society.
15. New Cadillacs are more expensive than new Honda Civics.

16. A new Cadillac is, in the long run, a much better investment than a new Honda Civic.

4.3.3 | *Thesis Statements with a Scientific or Historical Focus*

A particular subject area that can cause trouble for those setting up an argument is one which appears, at first glance, largely factual. This can be a problem in essays with a strong scientific or historical focus (e.g., a discussion of a nuclear reactor, or Galileo's astronomical observations, or Gandhi's campaign against the British in India). You need to remember that essays on historical or scientific events are not asking for a summary of those events (i.e., a rehash of the facts) but an argument about why those events matter.

You can do this by setting up the thesis as a statement about the *significance* of the focus: e.g., "Galileo's astronomical observations were a breakthrough in the history of science; they effectively challenged the traditional views of the universe and introduced a bold new method of understanding the heavens." In the course of the argument which follows, you will provide details of Galileo's work, but the central point of the essay will be an argument that this work was a significant breakthrough (which is an opinion about the focus).

Here are some examples of effective thesis statements about subjects which, at first glance, might seem purely factual:

1. Nuclear power is the most effective and practical way to generate the electrical power we need in the coming decades.

2. Marie Curie's pioneering work in physics and chemistry is one of the most significant achievements of modern science; it made a major contribution to revolutionary changes in the way scientists think about the atom.

3. The early and unexpected death of Alexander the Great quickly led to a major transformation of the political order in the Near East, an important factor in the early development of the Roman Empire.

4. Gandhi's successful tactics against the British in India were brilliantly conceived and courageously carried out, so much so that the British authorities found they had no effective answer to them.

In essays based on these thesis statements, the writer will, of course, discuss facts regarding nuclear power, Marie Curie's work, events following Alexander's death, and Gandhi's actions. But the emphasis in the essay will fall, not on these facts, but on the *significance* of these facts (i.e., the Main Body of the essay will be interpreting the facts to argue for the opinionated claim in the thesis, in answer to the questions: Why is nuclear power the most effective and practical way to generate our electrical power? Why was Marie Curie's scientific work so significant? What was so important about the effects of Alexander's death, especially in relation to the development of the Roman Empire? Why were Gandhi's tactics so brilliant and courageous?). The reader will not just be learning *what happened*, but, more importantly, will be finding out *why it matters*.

When your essay is focusing on a single historical person, be careful that you do not turn it into a review of the biographical information, so that instead of offering an argument it becomes simply a regurgitation of facts. Of course, you will have to offer biographical details in places, but only when those details contribute something to your argument—and the central thrust of the argument should be an evaluation of the significance of those facts. How did this person's achievements challenge his contemporaries and why was that important? Turning arguments about historical figures or events into long factual summaries (i.e., into little more than condensed accounts of what happened) is a very common mistake in undergraduate essays and research papers.

If all else fails, then you can try applying the following formula. Write out a sentence of the following form: *"In this essay I am going to argue the single opinion that* X (the particular focus of the essay) is very significant because (give your reasons for thinking the focus important)." Then get rid of the words in italics.

4.4 | The Start of an Outline for the Argument

Together, your subject, focus, and thesis make up the beginning of an outline for your essay. The initial setup for the argument (which may take considerable time to prepare) should result in something written down under the following headings:

GENERAL SUBJECT:
FOCUS 1:
FOCUS 2:
(FOCUS 3, IF NECESSARY):
THESIS:

Here are some examples of the start of such an essay outline:

GENERAL SUBJECT: The Affordable Care Act
FOCUS 1: The Affordable Care Act: benefits
FOCUS 2: The Affordable Care Act: benefits for the working poor
THESIS: (*In this essay I am going to argue the single opinion that*) While the Affordable Care Act is far from perfect, it does offer tangible, necessary, and long-overdue benefits to the working poor. This fact alone makes it a major improvement to health care in America.

GENERAL SUBJECT: Warfare and Technology
FOCUS 1: The machine gun
FOCUS 2: The machine gun: its impact on forms of combat

THESIS: (*In this essay I am going to argue the single opinion that*) No modern weapon has had such a revolutionary impact on the conduct of warfare as the machine gun. It has transformed not only the nature of combat but the way we think about battle.

GENERAL SUBJECT: The James Bond film *Skyfall*
FOCUS 1: The portrayal of women in the film
FOCUS 2: The portrayal of women in the film: the character of M
FOCUS 3: The portrayal of women in the film: the character of M: a feminist analysis
THESIS: (*In this essay I am going to argue the single opinion that*) While the portrayal of M in *Skyfall* is a great improvement compared to the portrayal of women in earlier Bond films, it is nonetheless not as feminist as it may first appear. M's character exists merely to provide Bond with a surrogate mother, and once her purpose is served she is immediately and violently eliminated from the story.

Such outlines look easy enough, but you may have to take time with them. And the time is worth spending, because if you do not clearly sort out for yourself and the reader just what you are arguing (the subject, focus, and thesis), then it is not going to matter very much what you do in the rest of the essay. If the opening does not set out the argument properly, then there is usually no recovery.

4.5 | Writing Introductory Paragraphs

Once you have an outline for an opening paragraph similar to the examples immediately above, transforming that outline into a coherent introductory paragraph is usually straightforward if you remember to move from a statement of the general subject, through a narrowing of the focus, to a clear and energetic

thesis statement. This sounds simple enough, but there are a few common problems you should take care to avoid.

1. Do not make the opening of the argument too abrupt and awkward. Take the time to go through the steps outlined above. If you are doing that properly, then the introduction should be a fairly substantial paragraph of between 150 and 200 words (at least). Never offer as an introduction a one-sentence paragraph something like the following: "In this essay I am going to discuss how the heroine is a fascinating character." That is much too rushed.

2. In the introductory paragraph, the sentences should normally become increasingly specific. The opening statement will probably be something quite general; its purpose is merely to alert the reader to the general subject of the argument. The sentences immediately following should be narrowing that general opening down to something more particular, so that just before you state the thesis of the argument, the focus of the argument is clearly defined.

3. Do not stuff the introduction with irrelevant detail (e.g., about the biography of the writer, the historical details of the book, sweeping generalizations about human beings, and so on, unless these are essential to the argument you will be developing). Keep directing the reader to the particular focus and thesis you wish to concentrate upon. Stay directly on the content of the discussion you wish to present.

4. Do not make the thesis a promissory note which lacks an argumentative edge: for example, something like the following: "This essay will discuss how domestic violence is a serious problem." Establish clearly the opinion about subject matter that you wish the reader to accept as persuasive. "Domestic violence, especially against women and children,

is a much more serious crime than current law enforcement practices reflect."

5. Make sure that the argument is clearly established by the end of the introduction. By that point the reader must be able to answer the following two questions accurately: What is this argument focusing on? What specific opinion about the focus does the arguer wish me to believe by the end? If you are not sure whether the opening paragraph does that clearly enough, give the paragraph to someone else to read and ask him to tell you what your essay is going to be about. If he cannot provide a clear answer, then revise the paragraph.

4.5.1 | *Exercises in Opening Paragraphs*

Exercise 1

Here are some sample opening paragraphs to an argumentative essay reviewing a film (the film and its details are fictional). Comment briefly on the quality of each paragraph as the introduction to an argument. If you think it is inadequate, then indicate why (give *specific* reasons that would help the writer correct what is wrong).

Example A

The film *To Rangoon on a Trading Ship* tells the story of Martin, a teenage runaway on a cargo boat which sails from London to the Far East. On board the ship are two other stowaways, Gumby and Sian, two friends, who know nothing about Martin's presence. The ship is called the *Narnia*. The captain is called Fred Jones. He hates stowaways and is keen to punish them whenever he finds them. Rangoon is in the Far East. The story is set in the early 1900's. Pirates chase the ship at one point. At another time, the ship joins a group of navy ships sailing off to a war in the Pacific. Martin is nineteen years old. He is played by Adam Blimph.

Example B

The film *To Rangoon on a Trading Ship* came out in 2014. It is the best film I have ever seen. Everything about it was splendid. Everybody should see it.

Example C

To Rangoon on a Trading Ship, a recent adventure film, tells the story of some young stowaways on a cargo vessel going to the Far East in the early years of this century. Martin, a young London boy, and two other teenagers, Gumby and Sian, escape from oppressive situations at home by stowing away on the *Narnia*, a vessel bound for exotic places. The ship and the young stowaways encounter all sorts of adventures, but ultimately the story resolves itself happily. The work contains many predictable elements, including a wicked captain, some pirates, brave teenagers who help each other, a storm at sea, a mutiny, and so on. These scenes are quite familiar to anyone who has ever seen or read many sea yarns aimed at a young audience. However, for a number of reasons, particularly the script, the direction, and the acting of the lead characters, this is not just another conventional romantic adventure aimed at the younger set. It is in many ways a mature, amusing, and inventive reworking of a traditional genre, well worth the price of admission, even for skeptical adults.

Example D

To Rangoon on a Trading Ship is a recent film directed by Sue McPherson. I really like her films because they usually combine a good script with some excellent camera work. Her first film, *Manhattan by Night*, won several prizes at film festivals, and in 2010 another work won her an award for best screenplay. McPherson is a filmmaker from Canada. She attended film school in New York and was in the graduating class that produced a number of excellent Canadian

filmmakers, including Alice Jackson and Terry Bright. I really like all their films. I think it's a shame that more Canadians don't support Canadian filmmakers by paying more attention to their work. That's why so many good directors go south to the United States. Anyway, McPherson's film is another excellent example of the high quality work that can be done by Canadians.

Exercise 2

Below are two pairs of opening paragraphs, the first pair on the *Odyssey* and the second pair on the Book of Genesis. Compare the two members of each pair. Which do you think is the more effective opening? Why? If you were in a position to recommend revisions to the writers of these paragraphs (especially the paragraphs you find less effective) what would you say?

Paragraph A

Homer's *Odyssey* recounts the adventures of the Greek hero Odysseus, in his return home from the Trojan War. In fact, much of the book is taken up with various tests of this epic hero, encounters in which he has to demonstrate his ability to overcome obstacles of various kinds. In the process of following Odysseus through these adventures, we, as readers, come to recognize many important qualities of the central character. We also learn a great a deal about what he values and about the nature of the world he lives in. There are many episodes in this exciting story which might serve to introduce us to these issues, for in virtually every adventure we learn something important about the hero and his values. One obvious and famous example is the story of his encounter with Polyphemos, the Cyclops. A close inspection of this incident tells us a great deal about what is most important in the poem. In fact, if we attend carefully to what is going on here, we come to understand some central features of Odysseus' character: his insatiable curiosity, his

daring, his cunning, his ruthlessness, and his very strong, even egotistical, sense of himself.

Paragraph B

Homer's *Odyssey* recounts the adventures of the Greek hero Odysseus, in his return home from the Trojan War. This is a very old story, composed by the poet Homer at some point in the eighth century BCE and passed on for many generations before it was written down. At first the poem existed only as an oral composition; it was recited by bards. Only later was it put into the form in which we have it today. No one really knows whether or not a poet named Homer actually existed. Homer also composed the *Iliad*, the story of Achilles. Both of these books played a central role in Greek religion and education, and they have been important parts of the tradition in Western literature ever since. The *Odyssey* was probably written after the *Iliad*. The *Odyssey* is a much easier poem to read than the *Iliad*. The story moves much more quickly, and there are a lot more adventures. One adventure that is particularly well known and important is the encounter with Polyphemos. This essay will discuss this episode, focusing on its importance.

Paragraph C

The Bible is one of the most important texts in Western society. Christianity has helped lay many of our moral foundations, and these are still an important part of modern society. For instance, many people still follow the Ten Commandments. However, not all of Christian beliefs still fit into our modern world. So the Bible is a source of oppression. There are many examples of this. For example the creation story clearly is oppressive to women. The dominion of people over nature also endorses oppression of non-human animals. And there is lots of killing of people by the Israelites in the name of the Lord. This also

is oppressive. And the story of Abraham and Isaac is oppressive as well.

Paragraph D

One of the central issues of the book of Genesis is the relationship between particular characters and the Lord. Repeatedly in the narrative, God selects an individual for special attention, and that individual becomes, in effect, an example of the appropriate relationship between God and humanity, a role model for the faithful. An obvious example of this point is Abraham, one of the most important of the patriarchs. He displays complete faith in God, and God rewards him with the Covenant. But Abraham's faith makes large demands on him, and we are forced to recognize in him just what a truly meaningful relationship to the Lord demands. Many places in the Abraham story bring out this point, but we can best appreciate it by exploring in detail the famous account of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. This section of Genesis explicitly and compellingly offers us an insight into the religious life defined and illustrated in the Old Testament, an apparently harsh but passionate and compelling belief. Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac illustrates a paradoxical conception of relationship to God in which total sacrifice is required—even the sacrifice of moral principles—but in which everything an individual sacrifices is returned to him.

Exercise 3

Here is another pair of opening paragraphs, this time not on literary topics. Evaluate them as introductions to an argument.

Paragraph E

There's a lot of talk these days about how we just have to do something about guns. Guns have always been a part of civilization. Human beings have used guns for hunting and for sport for centuries. A gun is also an expression of

human creativity. Many guns are fine objects of art. And anyway if we don't have guns the government will control us even more than they do now. Besides, the right to protect ourselves is obviously important. And guns don't kill people; people kill people. If we cannot have guns then how are we going to fend off the police when they start attacking our homes? Are we supposed to use kitchen utensils? So I say we should forget about any further gun control legislation. That's what this essay will argue.

Paragraph F

The question of increased governmental control over guns raises a number of important issues that the public seems eager to discuss. In fact, few subjects stir more passionate and widespread national debates than the issue of gun ownership and gun legislation. Every story about someone running amok with a gun—and these, we know, are frequent enough—has a lot of people calling for more regulations and restrictions on the sale of guns. In some quarters to oppose such legislation is seen at once as a sign of one's right-wing, red-neck credentials. So anyone who wishes to argue reasonably that those opposing more gun legislation may have a good case, or at least a case worth paying attention to, is unlikely to get a proper hearing in many forums. However, the attempt to present such a case must be made, because bringing down more restrictive legislation on guns will not merely do nothing to deal with our concerns about lethal weapons in the wrong hands, but will also threaten a number of other important personal rights which we take for granted.

Look very carefully now at the various reasons you found one member of each pair better as an introduction to an argument. Then look at those reasons again. Remember these criteria when you have to evaluate your own introductory paragraphs.